



JSAA 2015 Panel Abstract

Panel Title: **Hearts and Flowers Abroad: Shōjo Beyond Japan**

Part One of a joint panel, preceding Part Two: Tending to the World of Flowers and Ribbons: Shōjo Fashion and Cosplay Subcultures (Jenny Hall, Megan Russell, & Sharon Elkind)

The global advancement of Japanese popular culture has introduced the term ‘shōjo’ into English: in 2011 it was added to the Oxford Dictionary, described as a genre of Japanese *manga* and *anime* for girls. However, ‘shōjo’ is much more than a genre label; it denotes a critical concept and an imagined figure of the girl. The concept took form in the Meiji period, when education for girls created a new reading cohort and period of adolescence; local fiction, art, and fashions blossomed alongside imported children’s literature.

Academic exploration and theories of the shōjo have developed in response to these girl genres. This panel proposes that because the idea of the shōjo formed from a composite of cultures, such Japanese shōjo studies can also help us to interpret texts from beyond Japan’s borders. The perspectives developed within shōjo studies, we argue, locate a space where girls and women position themselves somewhere in between the diametric opposition of sexualization and modesty that is found in girl studies and discourses in English.

We demonstrate this applicability by using shōjo theory to interpret fairy tale, young adult fiction, manga, anime, and cosplay in English. Apart from being closely associated with girlhood, our objects of analysis share an obsession with repetition and reinterpretation; in them, girls’ texts are endlessly recycled and renewed. Our use of Japanese shōjo criticism to read these reiterations of ‘the girl’ in English-language texts reverses the more usual direction of intellectual exchange, challenging the Eurocentrism of theory in literary and cultural studies in English.

Discipline: Cultural Studies; Literature and Translation

Key words: gender; girl studies; shōjo

Paper 1:

Of Girls, Books, and Beasts: Shōjo Studies Perspectives on the Girl Reader in ‘Beauty and the Beast’ retellings

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In her famous 1756 French tale of ‘Beauty and the Beast’, Madame Le Prince de Beaumont describes her protagonist as a quiet bookworm. This image of Beauty as an avid reader has been taken up in subsequent versions including the animated Disney film (1991) and several young adult novels. Indeed, the girl as a prolific reader is a favourite tradition in girls’ and other literature, reprised in characters from *Little Women*’s Jo March to Hermione in *Harry Potter*. Girls’ literature in Japan has imported such images of reading and writing girls and, of course, long produced its own.

This paper argues that Japanese shōjo studies can offer alternative interpretations to common conceptions of the girl as a passive or uncritical reader, vulnerable to the influence of her reading matter. As many scholars have observed, patterns of production and consumption of *shōjo shōsetsu* and *manga* (girls’ novels and manga) centre on the connections girl readers forge through stories, particularly in readers’ columns for girls’ magazines. This has allowed shōjo studies theorists to propose community-driven and critical possibilities for girls’ reading, both as it is imagined within fiction and as it is actually practised. Shōjo studies can also inform the analysis of fairy tale retellings, as the girls’ texts themselves as well as academic responses often engage with fairy tale symbolism and structures. Shōjo studies about girls’ reading practices are therefore used here to reconsider the characteristic figure of the girl reader in English-language retellings of ‘Beauty and the Beast’.

Paper 2:

An Enchanted Garden of Liminality: Locating a Shōjo-scape in *Flowers in the Attic*

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V. C. Andrews' *Flowers in the Attic* (1979) has been capturing the hearts of adolescent girls for nearly 40 years. The enduring popularity of the novel is reinforced by the success of its recent adaptation on the small screen (2014). Despite its popularity, the work has received little, if any, scholarly scrutiny. While this may be due to its controversial storyline, which includes incest, murder and the confinement of children by their own mother, another reason may be the highly 'girlish' ambience of the story, which is often treated in a derogatory and unfavourable manner in Anglophone culture. In such a culture, the period of 'adolescent girlhood', which the story's heroine Cathy embodies both somatically and metaphorically, tends to be perceived as merely an unstable and perilous stage that women pass through as they mature.

By focusing on its recent TV film adaptation, this paper proposes another reading. The perspectives developed within Japanese shōjo studies assign a degree of independence to such a state of 'girlhood', which they term as a 'shōjo-scape'. *Flowers in the Attic* might be representative of a 'shōjo-scape', where the concept of adolescent girlhood and aesthetic qualities associated with it are ascribed greater significance and focus, and by implication a considerable degree of principality. By re-evaluating the potential of cross-cultural applicability of Japanese shōjo criticism, this analysis of *Flowers in the Attic* might serve to provide an alternative to the monolithic, often Eurocentric idea of intellectual 'exchange' that flows only in one direction.

Paper 3:

Shōjo Beyond Shōjo: 2.5 Dimensional Interpretations of Shōjo-ness

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In “The Genealogy of *Hirahira*” (1980, trans. 2010), Honda Masuko describes girlhood as a liminal time in which the shōjo (young girl) voluntarily cocoons herself in a dreamlike world filled with ribbons and flowers – a place to safely enjoy ‘frivolous’ shōjo pursuits such as reading books, *manga* and magazines.

But what happens when the shōjo leaves her cocoon?

This paper will look at shōjiness in the liminal 2.5D space that occurs halfway between the 2D world of literary texts, manga pages and fashion magazines and the harsh 3D reality of the ‘real world.’ Concentrating on one of Japan’s most famous magical girl heroines, it will track *Sailor Moon* from the 2D mediums of manga and two anime adaptations to the 2.5D mediums of stage musicals and cosplay and into the 3D world of sexy themed lingerie and other brand products. In the Japanese context, *Sailor Moon* is forcibly kept as a young shōjo. The 1992-1997 anime adaptation has recently been rebooted (replaced) by a new adaptation with even wider-eyed character designs. Actresses in 2.5D musicals are cycled out when they reach a certain age and cosplayers often choose to ‘graduate’ when they marry or reach 30. But outside of Japan, cosplayers are increasingly refusing to grow out of their shōjo tendencies. How do non-shōjo perform shōjiness? Or, in the same way shōjo manga readers graduate to Ladies’ comics and *L bungaku*, should cosplayers in their 30s be laying claim to the title of Layer? (the Japanese word for cosplayer practitioners).

Given that 2.5D activities such as musicals and cosplay take place in controlled and constructed spaces, does the shōjo ever leave her cocoon or does she simply swap it for another liminal realm?